Enhancing the effectiveness of English Language teaching for engineers in India

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Accepted 29 October, 2013

India is today witnessing a major boost in the “demand for English language”. With its firepower of engineers, chartered accountants, doctors, MBAs, lawyers, research analysts, India is well positioned to address the global Knowledge Process Outsourcing / Business Process Outsourcing need. With a ready access to a large intellectual pool and domain expertise in specialized areas, India has been in the business of knowledge process outsourcing and other outsourcing services for more than six years. It will continue to maintain its lead due to its abundant skilled manpower and lead in areas such as qualifications, quality of work, linguistic capabilities and work ethics. No other country can hope to match India in terms of an English-speaking talent pool, not even China, despite its larger population and despite its Herculean efforts to train people in the English language skills. Now on one hand, we are hoping to compete with some of the greatest nations in the world, and on the other hand, Rajasthan is still facing the challenge of being a backward state. Despite being very hardworking and intellectually sound, our younger generation is still struggling for an international exposure on account of below average communication skills. In the present article, through questionnaires and interviews of representatives of academia and industry the researcher has tried to review the curriculum and methodology being followed in the Engineering colleges of Rajasthan. Based on their responses some substantial measures for the improvement in the current curriculum and teaching methodology are being offered which will help in enriching the language training programmes. These measures and suggestions are directly in accordance with the needs of our students and the demands of the corporate world and would further help in affecting improvement in language teaching programmes at college level.

Key words: Language teaching, industry expectations, academia, methodology, curriculum

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the twentieth century, technological inventions and developments such as telephone, fax, and most importantly computers and the Internet have brought people closer from every continent and helped spread English as the most convenient communicational tool (Coury, 2001). As a consequence, English enjoys the prestige among other languages, which can easily be seen from the number of people of all ages using English compared to those studying and taking interest in other languages (Walters, 2002).

Nowadays, English is regarded as the lingua franca of international business, economy, science, technology and even sports, where language does not play such a significant role as in other facets of contemporary life. It is overwhelmingly dominant in scientific and technological communication with all relevant and ground-breaking information being primarily published, distributed and stored in English (Crystal, 1997). As far as engineering disciplines are concerned, the English language plays as important a role as in other similar fields, being the most important language in conveying knowledge and new inventions on the international scale. However, with the
growing demand for language skills, one factor that is hampering us from attaining the ideal situation is the gap in the present language teaching scenario and the desired outcome. This gap is quite obvious from the fact that even the brightest of our engineering students are not being able to get good job placements.

Realizing this, it is essential to not only review curriculum and methodology so as to make the learning process more effective and result oriented but also offer suggestions for improving core competencies in areas considered basic to successful adjustment and achievement in the challenging business environment.

Need for competency based curriculum

Venkataraman and Krishnamurthy (2013) have criticized the English language courses at the tertiary level in India for being excessively knowledge-based instead of being skill-based. They hold that view that despite the focus on communication skills in some of the recent courses introduced in universities and colleges, the courses are handicapped because the objectives are not well defined, and consequently, the teaching methodology, testing and evaluation are sketchy. The learning objective must be specific, measurable and limited to a single definite result. For example every curriculum should have a specific objective stating,

1. conditions (how or where the student will perform the task)
2. behavioral verb (describe student behavior)
3. criteria (how well the student performs the behavior)

For e.g. by the end of the semester, the students will be able to write business correspondences (letter, memos, emails), using proper format and tone.

Next point in question is course content focusing quite a lot on the literary texts which are far removed from the needs of engineering in terms of subject, usage and vocabulary. The curriculum should therefore include texts, vocabulary and exercises specific to the needs of the students with focus on its relevance in their future professional setting. For all the four skills, there should be exercises and assignments based on the situations and subjects related to Engineering so that while practicing the language students get an opportunity to be acquainted with the subject and the topic too. Such a practice would facilitate language acquisition at a faster pace as it will directly address the needs of the students.

The curriculum should be made competency- based. “The basic context of the competency-based curriculum is a list of skills and techniques required by business, industry, and other employment places which are generally task-oriented to serve current and merging needs - in more specific terms, what new graduates are expected to do as part of a given enterprise.

Indeed, this is a commendable initiative in terms of making educational institutions responsive to the preferences and requirements of the job market. It is also a strong marketing strategy for educational institutions as a "come on" for students aiming to land a job after graduation”(A Competency-Based Curriculum, Manila Bulletin, January 18, 2009).

Need for effective teaching methodology

Another essential component that requires immediate attention is the emphasis on speaking skills. In a semester system of the engineering course, considering the time constraint, students focus only on the core subjects and the rest of the papers are dealt with only for scoring marks and their knowledge remains confined only to the extent required for passing the examination. Such a practice is detrimental to language learning. Nunan (2003) goes on to point out the gap by stating that although the government rhetoric stresses development of practical communicative skills, at the classroom level, the emphasis is on the development of reading and writing skills for the purpose of passing entrance examinations.

Therefore, with due consideration to the requirements of the industry as well as the students, if not more at least equal emphasis should be laid on speaking skills as a part of curriculum and the evaluation component.

Besides speaking skills, some relevant modules and corresponding practice sessions in listening and reading skills should be a part of the curriculum too.

Acknowledging the below average competence level of the students and the increasing demands of the industry from the future professionals, it is imperative that English as a compulsory subject should continue till the final year of the course, with increasing emphasis on the active skills. Any skill requires constant practice and therefore after familiarizing the students with the theoretical aspects of the language learning, towards the end of the course, there should be emphasis on its application in a practical setting. The Communicative Approach is the latest version of what is usually referred to collectively as the "inductive/usage model," so called because linguistic structures are deemphasized and the teacher's principal role is to encourage interaction (Celce-Murcia, 2001). Such an approach for language teaching will lead to better and a more confident use of language by the learners.

The evaluation techniques and paper patterns should also focus on testing more of the active skills. The passive skills should be tested through internal assessment. Biggs (2003) argues that validity is achieved when the assessment items assess the kind of knowledge desired in particular content areas. The assignments and questions/exercises should therefore be prepared with a
distinct focus on the needs of the students and the demands of the industry.

In the first two semesters, the students should be made to learn and practice accuracy in grammatical structures and then during the later years of the course, they should be given practice in using those structures for practical and professional purposes. As Widdowson (1995) points out, we need to consider the larger discourse context or the meaning that lies beyond grammatical structure. To go beyond grammar, language should be looked at as a form of social practice (Fairclough, 1992).

As a part of the course, students can also be sent to a corporate setting for 15-20 days for an internship. Besides giving the actual workplace training to the students, this will also familiarize them with the professional requirements in terms of language skills. Zuboff (1988, p. 395) argued prophetically: “Learning is no longer a separate activity that occurs either before one enters the workplace or in remote classroom settings … learning is not something that requires time out from being employed in productive activity; learning is at the heart of productive activity”.

Since by endeavoring to prepare better professionals, we are actually catering to the demands and the expectations of the industry, industry’s role in curriculum design and development cannot be undermined. In curriculum design, it is important to solicit the industry’s views to ensure its relevancy to industry needs. This can be done by inclusion of some industry people in the committee for curriculum planning and design. Such an arrangement would guarantee a curriculum design that will take into account industry (employer) participation, besides university perception, so that the graduate has the professional qualification expected by Industry. The suggestions made by the industry representatives on the curriculum design will help the educationists in shaping the curriculum in accordance with the industry’s requirements and expectations.

Brown (2005) also described some of the benefits of industry involvement in the curriculum:

“When industry representation is involved…, students are able to extend themselves and actively participate knowing that they are under conditions more similar to the workforce than in their theoretical courses. “This was good as it made it clear that we were learning things that we could put into practice in the future.”. The result is that students are more attentive to the steps involved in completing the task than they normally would be, and thereby learn more from the experience, which actively prepares them for the workforce. Employers see great benefit in industry running a practical course, as hearing from “people like Kim [White], where they’ve had to do things and things didn’t work” will increase a young engineer’s awareness of how designs on paper do not necessarily eventuate in reality.

She further commented, “… the importance of industry involvement in experiential learning, as greater depth can be achieved than would be the case under academic instruction, increasing a student’s potential in the workforce”.

Besides industry’s participation in curriculum design, there should be regular revision of the syllabus in order to keep it updated with the changing times and the requirements. The Vice-Chancellor of Nagarjuna University, L. Venugopala Reddy, has said that standards of education in India are not, in any way, lower than those of western countries, but there is a gap in orientation. Prof. Reddy laid emphasis on the various measures required for the improvement in quality of higher education. He said that curriculum must be revised constantly to meet modern needs (Source: The Hindu, 1 Oct. 04).

CONCLUSION

Zahid (2008) concluded that higher education and industry linkages should remain alive for constant updating of courses. By creating the partnership between universities and industry, both can benefit from resources of each other.

Paliwal (2009) has focused on coordination among the efforts of academia, industry and the government. He emphasized on instilling the traits which are expected by the prospective employers. Mannan (2003) recommended that faculty-student ratio should be close to 1:10, frequent revision of syllabus in consultation with the industry and institutions should create the professionals with global mind set so that they can adjust in different cultural & social settings. By incorporating above measures in curriculum and methodology, this gap between the expectations and the needs can be minimized and our objective of preparing the students for the international corporate scenario can also be achieved to a certain extent.

REFERENCES


